

null
Diana T Fritz 02/05/2007 05:36:00 PM From DB/Inbox: Search Results

Cable
Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 03210

SIPDIS
CXABU:

ACTION: POL
INFO: MEPI RSO AMB DCM P/M ECON

DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB:MSISON
DRAFTED: POL:SRADDANT CG:JDAV
CLEARED: A/DCM:HOWINDECKER POL:JMAYBURY MEPI:HWECHSEL

VZCZCADI692
PP RUEHC RUEHZM RUEHRH RUEHDE
DE RUEHAD #3210/01 2600604
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 160604Z SEP 04
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5947
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1379
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 4341

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 003210

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/RA and DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/14
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [TC](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL VIEWS ON PROSPECTS FOR UAE
DEMOCRATIZATION

REF: A) ABU DHABI 1589 B) 03 DUBAI 1318 C) 03
DUBAI 3529 D) 03 ABU DHABI 1813 E) 03 DUBAI 2103

11. (U) Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison
for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D).

12. (U) This message was jointly drafted by Embassy
Abu Dhabi and ConGen Dubai.

13. (C) SUMMARY: The slow but steady regional trend
toward democratization has triggered some, albeit
limited, discussion in Emirati circles about the
prospects of taking similar steps here in the UAE.
The local media has been reporting regularly on the
progress of Saudi Arabia's moves toward its first
municipal election, and people often compare and
contrast Saudi Arabia's democratization steps to
those made in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. Our
contacts were generally supportive of
democratization in the region, although they
maintain that UAE rulers should adopt changes
slowly. A proposal in Dubai to hold popular
elections for a District Council was dropped this
month in lieu of an appointed council. END
SUMMARY.

EMIRATI THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRATIZATION

14. (C) Dr. Muhammed Abdullah Al Roken, an attorney
who is seeking government permission to operate an
independent human rights NGO (Ref. A), told Poloff
that UAE nationals are ready for increased
political participation, and are watching and

quietly discussing the shift toward democracy in other Gulf countries. However, Al Roken, an avowed Islamist who was removed from a professorship at UAE University in Al Ain post-9/11 as part of a government sweep of potential extremists from positions of influence, believes that change will have to flow from the government to the masses, not vice versa. He believes that most Emiratis would not try to pressure the UAEG into political changes for fear of social and political blowback. He opined that the wealthy are too self-centered to risk political and social disfavor. On the other hand, poorer and less educated Emiratis are too intimidated to speak out, he believes, and count their blessings that they are able to approach their rulers occasionally for handouts.

15. (C) At the other end of the spectrum, some Dubai contacts have argued that Dubai and the other emirates already have functioning "bedouocracies" - - their term for the existing political system of rule by hereditary tribal chiefs who hold daily "open courts" or majlises, during which all male citizens can have direct access to their leaders, should they desire it. (Note: Rulers' majlises are all-male events. End note.) This system amounts to a type of direct representation that, they feel, serves the UAE's small population quite well and obviates the immediate need to import western-style democracy. Many others, particularly in Dubai, believe that it is very important if only for PR purposes for the UAE to start moving cautiously in the direction of popular elections. (Note: The need for caution is mentioned frequently by even the strongest backers of increased political participation in the UAE, mainly due to concerns about the "destabilizing" effects of direct elections, which some observers here believe have been evident in Kuwait and Bahrain. End note.)

UAEG VIEWS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

16. (C) Government views on holding elections vary from emirate to emirate. Dubai announced with much fanfare in April 2003 that it would hold district elections within the next three months (Ref. B). Dubai notables told us later in the year that a "Supreme Council" had been formed to come up with a detailed election plan, which would likely include some form of direct local elections, ideally prior to Summer 2004 (Ref. C). That deadline also passed without comment.

17. (C) During a recent meeting with Mohammed Gergawi, Chairman of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's Executive Office, CG asked for an update on planning for the proposed elections. Gergawi admitted somewhat sheepishly that the Supreme Council tasked with planning the elections had largely completed its work, and that the final plan does not envision any role for direct elections, even for Dubai's Emirati national population. Instead, committees of up to a hundred prominent citizens from each neighborhood would be appointed by the Ruler's office, and they would elect from among themselves a representative (or possibly several, depending on the population of the neighborhood) to send to a new District Council.

18. (C) CG asked whether the decision to move away from direct elections had been entirely local, or whether the views of others from neighboring emirates had been taken into account. Gergawi said he could not address that point, but that it was important to emphasize that the decision was taken mainly to ensure that "extremists" and other disruptive elements were not given a platform. He added that, in his opinion, UAE society was not mature enough to deal with the inherent instability of an

electoral free-for-all, even at the local/district level.
(Comment: This is disappointing news given that Dubai's proposed District Council elections were the first, and so far only, tangible hint that moves toward greater political participation might be in the cards for the UAE. End Comment.

¶9. (C) UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed has said in the past that he favors an early move to democratization in the UAE (Ref. D). He thought this would be a fitting legacy for his father, President Sheikh Zayed, and the President's support of the political change would make it more widely accepted, especially among conservatives. Sheikh Hamdan said that the fact that a number of other states in the region, including the Saudis, are opening up politically, adds a sense of urgency to the matter.

¶10. (C) However, other Emirati officials are more leery of moves toward democratization both here and regionally, and even if they support the concept of democracy, they believe governments must move carefully. The ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, recommended last year that the USG should not push too hard for democratization in the Arab world, since holding elections now could result in the election of members of radical Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood (Ref. E). Instead of moving directly towards popular elections, Al Qassimi recommended that the USG encourage other long-term steps that foster a culture of democracy, such as improving the education system.

COMMENT ON U.S. ROLE

¶11. (U) While it is important that moves toward democratization are UAE-initiated, there are a number of steps the USG can take to expedite the trend and assist the government and potential electorate to make the transition to democracy as smooth as possible. MEPI is well positioned to continue offering reform programs that emphasize increased civil society participation and explain democratic processes. The MEPI-sponsored Media Strategy Assistance Workshop, to be held in Abu Dhabi next month and attended by 30 participants from the region, is an excellent example of how the U.S. can support reform in the UAE. Mission will continue to nominate key UAE leaders for IV programs, such as the one currently supporting a trip of Federal National Council appointees to Washington, D.C. Finally, Mission will continue to encourage the UAEG to participate in G8/BMENA events that promote democratic reform via economic and civil society dialogue, such as the September 24 BMENA/Foreign Ministers' meeting on the margins of UNGA, and the October 1 BMENA/Finance Ministers' meeting on the margins of the IMF/World Bank annual meeting in Washington.

SISON